

Han Kang's *Human Acts*

CONTEXT: Han Kang's novel, which depicts the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea wherein students and protesters were massacred by the military government, is an example of **postmodern literature**. Postmodern literature is a form of literature that is characterized by the use of metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and which often thematizes both historical and political issues.

Below, in the table, are just a few examples of postmodern techniques that Kang uses in order to help explore themes and issues in the novel. There are definitions and very basic examples.

INSTRUCTIONS: Your job, in pairs/groups, is to identify examples of Kang using similar techniques, using quotes/paraphrased sections to support your ideas, and to link these techniques to a commentary on themes or issues in the novel.

Technique and Definition	Basic Example	Example from <i>Human Acts</i>	How this narrative choice helps to convey meaning
2nd Person Point of View Definition: The narrator addresses the reader directly using "you," making the reader feel involved in the events. This perspective can create a sense of immediacy and intimacy, as well as alienation.	"You are walking through the streets of Gwangju, blood staining your hands, and you hear the sound of footsteps behind you. Your heart beats faster, but you don't stop." In this example, the reader is thrust into the scene, making them feel like a participant in the unfolding tragedy.		

<p>Non-linear Narratives and Flashbacks</p> <p>Definition: The narrative does not follow a chronological order. Events are presented out of sequence, often using flashbacks to reveal key information about characters, events, or motivations. This technique mirrors the way memory works, which is often fragmented and disjointed.</p>	<p>"Later, you remember the screams. But at the time, you couldn't hear anything. The sound of your own footsteps in the rain was all you could focus on."</p> <p>Here, the character reflects on a moment from the past (flashback), which disrupts the flow of the present narrative. This non-linear approach emphasizes the disconnection between past and present.</p>		
<p>Impressionism</p> <p>Definition: A style of writing that focuses on capturing fleeting feelings, perceptions, and sensations rather than detailed, objective descriptions. The emphasis is often on the emotional impact or subjective experience of a moment rather than its factual accuracy.</p>	<p>"The air smelled of iron and burning. It was not the air you could breathe, but something heavy that clung to your lungs, sharp and metallic."</p> <p>In this example, the description of the air isn't literal but reflects the emotional weight and sensory overload of the experience. The focus is more on the feeling of the atmosphere than on its concrete details.</p>		
<p>Historiographic Metafiction</p> <p>Definition: This is a literary technique where the novel calls attention to its own construction</p>	<p>"They tell you this was an uprising, but the word 'massacre' is never spoken. You wonder how many versions of the same event can be told, and which one</p>		

<p>of history. The narrative blends historical events with fictional elements, blurring the line between fact and fiction. It challenges traditional historical narratives by presenting multiple perspectives, often questioning the accuracy of "official" accounts.</p>	<p>is the truth." (the novel then tells multiple perspectives, linking this idea to the novel itself)</p> <p>In this passage, the novel critiques how history is constructed and how different perspectives (official and personal) shape our understanding of events. The fictional story examines real historical events, showing the complexity of truth.</p>		
<p>Matter-of-Fact Diction and Register to Describe Violence</p> <p>Definition: The language used to describe violent events is blunt, detached, and almost clinical. The contrast between the horror of the event and the unemotional language creates a chilling effect, underscoring the normalization of violence.</p>	<p>"He fell to the ground. Blood pooled around him. The soldiers walked away as if nothing had happened."</p> <p>This direct and unemotional description of a violent act increases the impact of the brutality while also highlighting the dispassionate nature of the violence itself.</p>		
<p>Delayed Decoding</p> <p>Definition: This refers to the technique of revealing information to the reader in fragments or at a later point in the narrative, making them piece together the meaning over time.</p>	<p>"You reach out to touch the body, but your fingers pull back as if they already knew it was too late. It is hours before you realize it was your brother's face."</p> <p>Here, the narrator initially does not process the full impact of</p>		

It reflects how trauma, memory, or truth is not always immediately accessible or understandable.	what they are encountering, and the realization comes only much later, after emotional and mental distance has been created.		
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